

# C. S. Lewis and Liberal Christianity

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Everyone may admit that the twentieth century is an age of science. Not only products of scientific technology have changed our way of life, but the method of science has changed our way of thought. Now, science does not hold a proposition to be true until it has proved it by some objective means, such as experiments and statistics, and this way of suspension of belief affects even theology and philosophy in this century. Many people today believe all that has been proved scientifically, and tend to disparage what is objectively unprovable by science as “merely” subjective, or unreal.

A movement in theology that is influenced by scientific way of thought is liberal Christianity that originated in 19th century Germany.

Liberal Christians tend to reject miracles, and to regard God not as supernatural and transcendent of this natural world but rather as present within the world so that there is no discontinuity between the natural and the supernatural.

It also rejects religious dogmas and rituals that are based on authority alone. All beliefs must be assessed by experience and reason. Even the Scriptures are not wholly and uncritically acceptable as divine revelation. Because the Bible is the work of writers limited by their historical background, it cannot be infallible record of divine revelation. Besides, it insists that because the world has changed since the time Christianity was founded, making biblical terminology and creeds incomprehensible to people today, it is now necessary to re-interpret the Bible.

In this paper we shall follow this movement of liberal Christianity and then study C. S. Lewis's criticism against this movement, as a representative of orthodox Christianity.

## < On Miracles >

In 1835, D. F. Strauss published *The life of Christ*, a biography of Jesus as a human personage. It was probably the first of a series of biographical attempts to follow the life of historical Jesus, made by such historians as Earnest Renan and Adolf Harnack.

In 1901 Adolf Harnack, a German theologian and church historian, published *What Is Christianity*, which is to be his best seller. In this widely read book, he presents Jesus as an example of higher righteousness governed by the law of love that exists independent of religious worship. He presupposes as if axiomatically that there cannot be miracles that break the law of nature. In this, he is a naturalist who denies the existence of the God who works on nature from outside of it or from above. However, he does not deny the existence of the supernatural God altogether. While denying possibility of miracles, he still says it is possible that nature as a whole serves a higher end. Besides, he is con-

scious that we do not yet know all the powers working in the cause and effect system in nature. His denial of miracles as violations of the laws of nature is thus weakened by his modesty about the knowledge of the laws of nature themselves.

Then, forty years after Harnack's *What is Christianity*, a German theologian Rudolf Bultmann positively rejects miracles and mythological elements in the New Testament. On April 21, 1941, he delivered a lecture to be published later as "New Testament and Mythology" (*Kerygma und Myth*) in which he says:

We cannot use electric light and...at the same time believe in the spirit and wonder world of New Testament. (p. 4)

Here is a manifest belief that science refutes miracles just because it is "unscientific."

Against such theological movement to see miracles as incredible in the age of science, C. S. Lewis positively believes the miracles in the Scriptures to be true.

In *Miracles*, Lewis defines "Miracle" as "an interference with Nature by supernatural power," (p. 9) as he thinks the word would mean to "the common reader." (ibid.)

If there exists some supernatural power, it is possible that it works on nature from outside or from above. As long as you are a materialist or a naturalist who believes that nothing exists except nature, i.e. nothing exists outside the interlocking cause and effect system of nature, you cannot believe in any miracles. However, in an argument for the truth of miracles, Lewis disproves such materialism, presenting us human reason as a counterproof: Our concept of nature depends on the validity of reasoning because everything we know, beyond our immediate sensations, is inferred from those sensations. Unless human reasoning is valid no science can be true. Even a materialist's belief depends on this validity. Yet, Lewis points out, if materialistic view is right, our reasoning is only chemical events of atoms in our brains. And he thinks that if our reasoning is nothing more than that, it is impossible to hold our reasoning power to be valid.

Thus a strict materialism refutes itself for the reason given long ago by professor Haldane: "If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motions of atoms in my brain, I have no reason for supposing my brain to be composed of atoms. (*Possible Worlds*, p. 209)

But Naturalism, even if it is not purely materialistic, seems to me to involve the same difficulty, though in a somewhat less obvious form. It discredits our process of reasoning or at least reduces their credit to such a humble level that it can no longer support Naturalism itself. (*Miracles*, p. 19)

Thus Lewis concludes that naturalism is wrong and that human reason at least is not a natural phenomenon. Lewis calls our attention to the fact that the distinction we have to make between Reason and Nature is not one between "mind" and "matter," or between "soul" and "body" but between reason and the whole mass of non-rational events whether physical or psychological. (*Miracles*, p. 29)

He believes that human reason is not included in the natural cause and effect system but is something of supernatural. He says, "The knowledge of a thing is not one of the thing's parts. In this sense something beyond Nature operates whenever we reason."

(*Miracles*, p. 29)

the Gulf Stream produces all sorts of results: for instance, the temperature of the Irish Sea. What it does not produce is maps of the Gulf Stream. But if logic, as we find it operative in our own minds, is really a result of mindless nature, then it is a result as improbable as that.... It is as if cabbages, in addition to resulting from the laws of botany also gave lectures in that subject. (Lewis's italics, *Christian Reflections*, p. 64)

Then, rational thought within each human being is a specimen of supernature, "which is outside or independent of [Nature]. In relation to Nature, rational thought goes on 'of its own accord' or exists 'on its own'." (*Miracles*, p. 31)

Thus, he finds human reason a counterproof against materialism that denies miracles. But not only that, he finds it also to be a datum from which to infer the existence of an absolutely independent Reason that is to be identified with God.

[Rational thought in a man] might be independent of Nature by being dependent on something else... One man's reason has been led to see things by the aid of another man's reason, and is none the worse for that... That other Reason might conceivably be found to depend on the third, and so on; it would not matter how far this process was carried provided you found Reason coming from Reason at each stage. It is only when you are asked to believe in Reason coming from non-reason when you must cry Halt, for, if you don't, all thought is discredited. *It is therefore obvious* that sooner or later you must admit a Reason which exists absolutely on its own. (my italics, *Miracles*, pp. 31–32.)

Not every reader would agree with Lewis when he says "It is therefore obvious." His argument here is in the tradition of Thomas Aquinas's "Five Ways" of argument for the existence of God in *Summa Theologiae*. (Prima Pars, articulus 3) (cf. *Summa Theologiae*, Prima pars, ed. Sac. Petri Caramello, pp. 12–13)

Aquinas in his third way finds that every contingent existence owes its existence to something other than itself that makes its existence necessary. Then he says, "Now it is impossible to go on to infinity in necessary things which have their necessity caused by another... Therefore we cannot but admit the existence of some being having of itself its own necessity, and not receiving it from another... This all men speak of as God." (*Summa Theologiae*, quot. from Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas, edited by Anton C. Pegis. in *Philosophy of Religion* ed. William L. Rowe and William J. Wainwright, p. 129) For Aquinas, too, it is obviously impossible to regress infinitely following the bases of things.

It is by the similar logic of inference from dependent things to the absolute independent thing to which all the dependent things ultimately owes their existence that Lewis draws the existence of absolute Reason from our human reason.

Then, Lewis further draws from absolute independence of the ultimate Reason its incessant existence.

[A self-existent Reason] must also exist incessantly: that is, it cannot cease to exist and then begin again. For having once cease to be, it obviously could not recall itself to

existence, and if anything else recalled it, it would then be a dependent being.

Lewis, like Aquinas, identifies this incessantly existent Reason with God.

Human minds, then, are not the only supernatural entities that exist. They do not come from nowhere. Each has come from Supernature: each has its tap-root in an eternal, self-existent, rational Being, whom we call God. Each is an offshoot, or spearhead, or incursion of that Supernatural reality into Nature. (*Miracles* p. 32.)

Likewise, Lewis also finds points of incursion of the supernatural God in our human imagination and moral laws, though we do not have space enough to discuss it here closely.

When he thus believes in God who is the absolute "Supernatural Reality", Lewis finds it quite possible that miracles occur, though contemporary scientists may deny miracles because miracles are unscientific, that is, such things should not be according to the laws of nature that science has discovered. However, Lewis reminds us:

Experiment finds out what regularly happens in Nature: the norm of rule to which she works. Those who believe in miracles are not denying that there is such a norm or rule: they are only saying that it can be suspended. A miracle is by definition an exception. How can the discovery of the rule tell you whether, granted a sufficient cause, the rule can be suspended? (*Miracles*, p. 50.)

Different from liberal theologians, Lewis believes in miracles as God's suspension of the Natural laws.

Lewis reminds us that in order to say that miracles never occur, you have first to assume absolute uniformity of Nature. This assumption in fact implies belief in God, though most modern scientists are not conscious of it.

If Naturalism is true we have no reason to trust our conviction that nature is uniform. It can be trusted only if quite a different Metaphysic is true. If the deepest thing in reality, the Fact which is the source of all other facthood... if it is a Rational Spirit and we derive our rational spirituality from It — then indeed our conviction can be trusted....

Men became scientific because they expected Law in Nature, and they expected Law in Nature because they believed in a Legislator. In most modern scientists this belief has died. (*Miracles*, pp. 109–110.)

Lewis does not maintain that belief in Miracle is a corollary of belief in God the legislator. He says, "That is the bargain." However, he finds an alternative between Naturalism that gives us no ground to believe in uniformity of experiences in Nature and Christianity that gives us a ground to believe in almost absolute uniformity with probability of Miracles. The very Christianity, that shows us God the Creator and Legislator of the world, says miracles have occurred. In this alternative, Lewis at least sees the later to be more probable.

As to the Miracle of the Incarnation, he not only believes it but, as a Christian, sees it as the central event and the main theme of human history. He finds an analogy between the Incarnation and the main motive of a music. The whole system of nature fits and is

illuminated by the Incarnation of God just as a great music as a whole fits and is illuminated by its central motive.

First of all, the co-existence of god and Man in Jesus is already exists in a similar, though not the same, way in the composite nature of man that is rational as well as physical. Besides, Lewis finds three characteristics of the Incarnation that are also characteristics of the whole nature. The first is the pattern of descent and re-ascension: from all vegetable life that once goes down into the earth to grow up again, to the myth of "dying God", e.g. Adonis and Osiris, there are ample examples throughout the world. The second is selectiveness: Christianity presents us the idea of chosen people; Maria is selected further from the nation, etc., while in nature when the vast space of universe where no organic life grows is compared with the smallness of the earth, and when we think how few of the seeds and spermatozoa can grow into maturity, selectiveness of nature is obvious. The third characteristic that is common between the Incarnation and nature as a whole is vacariousness: nothing in nature lives on its own. "Everything is indebted to everything else, sacrificed to everything else, dependent on everything else." (*Miracles*, p. 114)

The doctrine of the Incarnation, if accepted, puts this principle even more emphatically at the centre. The pattern is there in Nature because it was first there in God. All the instances of it which I have mentioned turn out to be but transpositions of the Divine theme into a minor key. (*Miracles*, p. 116.)

From these, Lewis sees the Incarnation as the central theme of the whole history. He says that "the more we understand what God it is who is said to be present and the purpose for which He is said to have appeared, the more credible the miracles become.... The mind which asks for a non-miraculous Christianity is a mind in process of relapsing from Christianity into mere 'religion.'" (*Miracles*, p. 137.)

### < Myth >

My present view... would be that just as, on the factual side, a long preparation culminates in God's becoming incarnate as Man, so, on the documentary side, the truth first appears in mythical form and then by a long process of condensing or focusing finally becomes incarnate as History. This involves the belief that Myth in general is not merely misunderstood history... nor priestly lying... but, at its best, a real though unfocused gleam of divine truth falling on human imagination. (*Miracles*. p. 137.)

Thus against the contemporary de-mythologizing movement, Lewis accepts myth as divine revelation. He also accepts dogmas and rituals as essential parts of Christianity. But before seeing Lewis's view on myth, we shall see how other leading philosophers of this century sees religious dogmas, myths and rituals.

Jung is probably the most well-known as one who makes much of myth and archetypes. In *Psychologie und Religion*, Jung finds the origin and essence of religion in the experience of numinous. He then sees truths in dogmas and mythical rituals that can

express even more comprehensive reality than theological theories.

[D]ogma expresses the psyche more completely than a scientific theory, for the latter gives expression to and formulates the conscious mind alone. Furthermore, a theory can do nothing except formulate a living thing in abstract terms. Dogma, on the contrary, aptly expresses the living process of the unconscious in the form of the drama of repentance, sacrifice, and redemption. (C. G. Jung, *Collected Works vol. 11. Psychology and Religion: West and East*, second edition, ed. Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, Gerhard Adler, William McGuire, Tr. R. F. C. Hull, p. 46)

Jung is here conscious that human reason alone is not capable enough to grasp comprehensive reality.

For Schleiermacher, religion is the feeling of "absolute dependence" or "God-consciousness." Dogmas about God and Jesus's historicity is not the essential part of religion. One can even do without them.

Then Bultmann says in *New Testament and Mythology*,

[T]he essential thing in the New Testament is not its religious and moral ideas but rather its religion or piety, in relation to which everything dogmatic, and hence also all objectifying mythological representation are secondary and indifferent. (P. 13)

What he thinks essential is religious life, i.e. "to be one with Christ, in whom God has taken symbolic form." (*New Testament and Mythology*, p. 13)

He says, "Basically, the mythological talk seeks to do *nothing* other than to express the significance of the historical event." (my italics, *New Testament and Mythology*, p. 35.) and says it suitable in this scientific age to de-mythologize the Scriptures into existential terms.

In so far as it is mythological talk it is incredible to men and women today because for them the mythical world picture is a thing of the past. Therefore, contemporary Christian proclamation... has to face the question whether the New Testament proclamation has a truth that is independent of the mythical world picture, in which case it would be the task of theology to demythologize the Christian proclamation. (Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology*, pp. 2-3)

It is to be pointed out that while denying miracles and mythology of the New Testament, Bultmann still believes in the Incarnation, though it is paradoxical to him. Finding it impossible to prove the historicity of Jesus to be an eschatological event, he commits himself to say,

the transcendence of God is not made immanent as it is in myth; rather, the paradox of the presence of the transcendent God in history is affirmed: "the word became flesh." (*New Testament and Mythology*, p. 42)

In this, we can see Bultmann's voluntary will to believe. He is aware of difficulty in the age of science to believe in religious dogmas. In "Theology as Science" (1941) he says, 19th century biblical science... speaks of faith on the presupposition that the object

of faith is inaccessible to scientific research. Thus, it speaks of believing, not of what is believed in....

For orthodoxy the *fides quae creditur* [i.e. what is believed in] is right teaching... If the *fides qua creditur* [i.e. believing] is viewed as assent to a *fides quae creditur*, itself understood as a sum of doctrines that one is supposed to believe... which one could hold to be true only by a partial if not total *sacrificium intellectus*, then the *fides qua creditur* has become a human work... one cannot believe in a doctrine but can only hold it to be "credible" or "incredible," right or wrong. (*New Testament and Mythology*, pp. 51-52)

Later, when we come down to a French anthropologist René Girard, we find total denial of escatological elements in religions and mythologies. In *La violence et le sacré* (1972), in *Le bouc émissaire* (1982), and in *La route antique des hommes pervers* (1985), he maintains that any religious ritual or myth is originated from an actual historical event in which some innocent man is killed as a scapegoat in a social crisis. It occurs especially when potential energy of social violence is heightened. This scapegoat is considered to be responsible for the crisis, directed the whole society's hatred, is killed, but by being so killed assuages the energy of social violence and, consequently, serves for keeping social stability.

Such rejection of escatological or revelational elements in mythological dogmas comes from the assumption that every truth must be rationally explicable and that religious dogma cannot endure rational criticism but can be held, in Bultmann's words, only through "*sacrificium intellectus*."

Also outside the realm of theology, there is a tendency to de-mythologize myths. For instance, Rorand Barth and Northrop Frye see myths to be a tool to stir and enchant public imagination to make the people accept social ideologies. Frye writes:

... the stories that tell a society what is important for it to know whether about its gods, its history, its laws, or its class structure. These stories may be called myths.... They form part of what the Biblical tradition calls revelation. (Northrop Frye, *The Great Code*, p. 31)

... a unified mythology is a powerful instrument of social authority and coercion, and it is accordingly used as such. About two generations ago there was a fashion for crying up the Middle Ages as a golden body of beliefs and values. The intellectual unity of that time, however, was largely a rationalizing of centralized authority. Marxism makes a similar appeal today as a unifying instrument of authority which includes an all-encompassing metaphysic, though of course it is not called that. (of. cit, p. 51)

They see myths as something intentionally made by men to their purpose. They think that rational interpretations of a myth is more real than the myth itself.

In this tendency of the contemporary age not to see myth and dogmas as rationally acceptable truth, C. S. Lewis not only believes in escatological divine element in Christian myths and dogmas but also thinks them compatible with reason.

In Lewis's opinion, human reasoning itself understands its own limitation and judges

it proper to co-operate with, or supplemented by, given dogmas to attain divine truth. In his biographical allegory *The Pilgrim's Regress*, the personified Reason tells John, the protagonist,

I can tell you only what *you* know. I can bring things out of the dark part of your mind into the light part of it... (Lewis's italics. p. 67)

Reason is the faculty of logical thinking, that infers truth from given data. Without data, it works out nothing, and the Reason in *the Regress* itself knows it. The data can be either by experience or by authority; they can be scientific, metaphysical, or theological. Lewis is conscious that science necessarily neglects the religious or the supernatural since it exclusively deals with natural facts. He says that during the time when science was born and made progress "the men of science were coming to be metaphysically and theologically uneducated." (*Miracles*. p. 46)

What supplies people with metaphysical or theological knowledge are myth and authorized dogmas in church.

All over the world, until quite modern times, the direct insight of mystics and the reasonings of the philosophers percolated to the mass of the people by authority and tradition. They could be received by those who were no great reasoners themselves in the concrete form of myth and ritual and the whole pattern of life. (*Miracles*, p. 40)

Myth is God's revelation to man. And as Lewis says, "knowledge by revelation is more like empirical than rational knowledge." (*God in the Dock*, p. 277) It cannot be logically explained away. Yet, it expresses metaphysical reality and in that sense, even more true than scientific, natural truths, or facts.

What flows into you from the myth is not truth but reality (truth is always *about* something, but reality is that *about which* truth is.) (*God in the Dock*, p. 66)

He believes in Christianity as "a myth which is also a fact." (ibid.) "The old myth of the Dying God, without ceasing to be myth, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history.... By becoming fact it does not cease to be myth: that is the miracle." (*God in the Dock* pp. 66-67) Thus, for Lewis the miracle of Incarnation is a Myth that became a fact.

Against a view that he finds in a modern liberal theologian that "in most actual religions the essence is found in connection with 'accretions of dogma and mythology' which have been rendered incredible by the progress of science... that it would be desirable, if it were possible, to retain the essence purged of the accretions," (Here, Lewis is referring to H. H. Price's "The Grounds of Modern Agnosticism," *Phoenix Quarterly*, vol. I, No. 1 (Autumn, 1946), p. 25) Lewis argues that it would be impossible to believe in God without any dogma and really act on the belief.

As soon as you do anything you have assumed one of the dogmas... The god of whom no dogmas are believed is a mere shadow. He will not produce that fear of the Lord in which wisdom begins, and, therefore, will not produce that love in



which it is consummated. (*God in the Dock*, p. 141)

Dogmas and rituals are often beyond human reason so that it is impossible to explain them away by science. However, they are not to be thought wrong or out of date just because they are rationally inexplicable. Rather, Lewis thinks that it is because of limitation of our intellectual capacity that we cannot understand the dogmas and rituals rationally:

Five senses; an incurably abstract intellect; a haphazardly selective memory; a set of preconceptions and assumptions so numerous that I can never examine more than a minority of them—never become even conscious of them all. How much of total reality can such an apparatus let through? (*Grief Observed*, p. 51)

While he is thus conscious of man's limitation in insight, he is also conscious of man's creaturely, and in a sense passive, relation to God the Creator. Then he thinks it "almost axiomatic" (*God in the Dock*, p. 144) that if God can be known "the initiative lies wholly on His side.... it will be by self-revelation on His part, not by speculation on ours." (*God in the Dock*, p. 144) Lewis is against liberal Christians, when he insists thus: "We, therefore, look for Him where it is claimed that He has revealed Himself by miracle, by inspired teachers, by enjoined ritual." (*God in the Dock*, p. 144)

His idea of myth can be seen most clearly in *The Pilgrim's Regress* where God tells John, who is the allegorical figure of the young Lewis:

The words of Wisdom are also myth and metaphor: but since they do not know themselves for what they are, in them the hidden myth is master, where it should be servant: and it is but of man's inventing. But this is My inventing. This is the veil under which I have chosen to appear even from the first until now. For this end I made your senses and for this end your imagination, that you might see My face and live. (*The Pilgrim's Regress*, p. 171)

What is said here is, first, that words used in science and those in myth are alike metaphorical in their origin, for, as he says elsewhere, "[w]hen we pass beyond pointing to individual sensible objects, when we begin to think of causes, relations, of mental states or acts, we become incurably metaphorical." (*Selected Literary Essays*, p. 263) Secondly, mythological words are above scientific ones in that they are conscious of their own origin, knowing how the original meaning holds influence upon the reader's imagination. It is also said that the myth of Christianity is truly revelational because it is God's own myth.

Actually, even in pagan mythology, Lewis recognizes some significant truth that foreshadows Christianity. For example, the myth of the fertility god who dies and is reborn every year is understood as a herald of the Son's Death and Resurrection.

Besides, Lewis is conscious of the limit of language in expressing reality, and thinks pictorial and mythical presentation sometimes conveys the reality better. He says that "all words except proper names are general—too general ever to be exactly right." (*Spenser's Images of Life*, p. 115) In *Perelandra*, the second of his space trilogy, the

hero finds difficulty in describing the impression of Venus. Then,

it is words that are vague. The reason why the thing can't be expressed is that it's *too definite* for language. (Lewis's italics, *Perelandra*, p. 33)

Reality loses some of its truth when reduced to words. God, that is the supreme Reality, cannot be expressed by human words as He really is. In this respect, myth is a better way of communicating reality, but then it is to be received in whole, with imagination. Lewis wrote to Arthur Greeves on 18th October, 1931.

The 'doctrines' we get out of the true myth are of course less true: they are translations into our concepts and ideas of that wh. God has already expressed in a language more adequate, namely the actual incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. (*The Letters of C. S. Lewis to Arthur Greeves*, p. 428)

As Lewis finds myth as God's revelation to man through his imagination, he thinks it better to accept it without intellectual analyzation. In *Letters to Malcolm*, discussing exegetics, he says that though the biblical images are not to be taken literally, when the purport of the images seems to conflict with the theological abstractions, we should trust the purport of the images:

For our abstract thinking is itself a tissue of analogies: a continual modelling of spiritual reality in legal or chemical or mechanical terms. Are these likely to be more adequate than the sensuous, organic, and personal images of Scripture—light and darkness, river and well, seed and harvest, master and servant, hen and chickens, father and child? The footprints of the Divine are more visible in that rich soil than across rocks or slag-heaps. *Hence what they now call "demythologising" Christianity can easily be "re-mythologising" it—and substituting a poorer mythology for a richer.* (my italics, *Letters to Malcolm*, p. 52)

### < Conclusion >

Lewis calls himself "a rationalist." He never believes in God against his reason. On the contrary, he rationally accepts christianity and argues for the existence of God more logically and rationally than many of the Christian apologists in this century. However, he also is conscious of limitation of reason and admits the role of mythological imagination and the importance of submissive acceptance of authority in the life of faith. He knows well that "There are more things in heaven and earth, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

In the general atmosphere of scientism, Lewis thus warns against the neglect of the supernatural reality of God. He is one of the strongest advocates for the orthodox Christianity of this century.

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